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Elizabeth Hilt

Marian University - Indianapolis, lizhilt122@gmail.com

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EMPOWERMENT THROUGH EDUCATION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF GENDER  
EQUALITY IN SCHOOLS IN BRAZIL AND THE UNITED STATES

Elizabeth Hilt  
July, 2017

With a grant and a fun group of feminist scholars who were interested in studying cultural and legal Brazilian equality, I packed my suitcase and headed to Brazil for 10 days of intense research. I am a recent graduate of Marian University in Indianapolis, with a future as a high school psychology and government teacher, and as such I was interested in the question of gender equality within the classroom setting. I had originally set out to study the inclusion of women in the history curriculum and classroom specifically, but due to our schedule and the pull of the Brazilian citizens I met, my topic widened to include how gender stereotypes limit the quality of the education, the discontent in the current educational system in Brazil, and the changes that Brazilians wish to see in their schools and societies.

**KEYWORDS: Education, Empowerment of Girls, United States, Brazil**

To begin this investigation, it was important to look at the problems and goals set forth by the United Nations to put women's empowerment in a worldly context. Since I had never left the United States of America before, I wanted to get as much background information before I embarked on the task of measuring women's empowerment in Brazilian schools. After grounding the basics in a worldly context, I moved more specifically to a comparison of Brazilian and the United States educational experiences and goals in secondary schools. With a general comparison of lives through observation, the next items to research were movements and pushes for change in Brazilian schools to counteract problems that they were experiencing. Finally, this paper will include a discussion of possible solutions and my final thoughts on the future of women's empowerment. One of the largest goals of education is to provide the tools to create future leaders who change the more unsatisfactory parts of the world around them.

### Background of Women's Educational Equality

As the United Nations declared, "Obtaining a quality education is the foundation to improving people's lives and sustainable development."<sup>1</sup> A fair, equitable, and quality education for all people, regardless of gender, is so important that it was listed as the first target for the United Nation's Goal 4, which says "By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes."<sup>2</sup> In fact, over half of the 10 targets that the United Nations have named for Goal 4 specifically include women to alleviate the gender gap that has persisted in the past. The proposed indicators to this target include primary and secondary completion rates for girls and

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<sup>1</sup>"Education – United Nations Sustainable Development." *United Nations*, n.d. Web. June 27, 2017.

<sup>2</sup>"Education – United Nations Sustainable Development." *United Nations*, n.d. Web. June 27, 2017.

boys. The United Nations sets these goals, and different entities have similar interests in mind and unique ways to measure this.

One of these measures is the Global Gender Gap Index which is published by the World Economic Forum. It is no surprise that one of the four pillars of the Global Gender Gap Index is focused on Educational Attainment, which is further broken down into literacy rate, enrollment in primary education, enrollment in secondary education, and enrollment in tertiary education. The United States, for example, has achieved scores of one or higher on each of these components, which indicates that there is gender equality in educational attainment. While this may be true, the quantitative evidence suggests that gender equality has been achieved, the quality of experiences and the gender-blind education may be questioned. Ensuring that what happens in the classroom matches the emerging statistics is important. Sure, girls are going to school, but what are they being taught directly and indirectly that will impact their sense of self-worth later in life? Educational gender equality is a worthwhile goal because it has been found that "...incorporating women's actual experience, conceptions of gender, and sexuality ...deepens students' understanding of the intricate links between politics and culture, private and public life, and the process by which national identity is forged."<sup>3</sup> How are girls learning to understand the complexities of their lives and their roles in society? Are the intended and unintended messages setting them up for success and providing the tools to empower young women? These are questions that cannot be answered by numbers and statistics, but are arguably equally as important as the qualitative questions of if they are going to school at all.

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<sup>3</sup>Accampo, Ellinor. "Integrating Women and Gender into the Teaching of French History, 1789 to the Present." *French Historical Studies* 27, no. 2 (April 1, 2004): 292.

Looking at the Gender Gap Index once again for Brazil, educational attainment is similar, if not better, than in the United States. The data for enrollment in secondary education, however, is missing or lacking. This leads us to question the quality of the female experience inside Brazil's classrooms. Although girls are showing up to school the same amount as their male counterparts, are they being represented in the same manner? Is their quality of education directed towards the female experience and problems in the same manner as their male classmates? Are females represented in the same way as males are? These are the questions I sought to answer during my observations in Brazil and, ultimately, I found some answers.

Other researchers were interested in the same questions as I was. One of these researchers was Marília Carvalho, author of "The Influence of Family Socialisation on the Success of Girls from Poor Urban Communities in Brazil at School." As Marília Carvalho would argue, "Often, upon learning that girls were attending classes and doing well, both social movements and public policy-makers concluded that there were no gender issues that needed to be addressed in relation to basic education."<sup>4</sup> It is critical, to both her and I, that women are, first of all, attending school, but more importantly, that they are being given the tools to become empowered members of society. Being an empowered member of society has five separate components, including "women's sense of self-worth; their right to have and to determine choices; their right to have access to opportunities and resources; their right to have the power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home; and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally."<sup>5</sup> After visiting

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<sup>4</sup>Carvalho, Marília. "The Influence of Family Socialisation on the Success of Girls from Poor Urban Communities in Brazil at School." *Gender And Education* 27, no. 6 (January 1, 2015): 583-598. Accessed May 9, 2017. *ERIC*, EBSCOhost.

<sup>5</sup>"Guidelines on Women's Empowerment." *United Nations*, n.d. Web. May 18, 2017.

Brazil, I would argue that some women are working very hard and consciously to achieve women's empowerment. This can be seen through women trying to better the lives of women around them. In this paper, I will outline several instances where women are rising above their situations to help themselves and those around them in order to succeed in spite of difficult circumstances.

Carvahlo would argue that in fact Brazil has achieved equality and women's empowerment. Through her research of families from the poor urban communities, she concluded that,

"The girls I had the opportunity to study – from urban low-income sectors in Brazil – not only had better school achievement than their brothers, but, despite living under situations of poverty and gender oppression, they also experienced ways of constructing autonomy and disrupting the strict rules of circulation in the public space and in the sexual division of labour. Their better performance at school did not result solely from the fact that they were disciplined and obedient, but mainly from their active investments in learning and from their dreams of a better future."

In her research, Carvahlo declared that women are actually benefiting from their education more than men. Women have been encouraged to pursue higher education in a way than men have not been pushed. The emphasis on women's success has pushed female students to be more prosperous and strive for higher goals than their male classmates. I was intrigued and hoped that this would prove to be true. While it is truly a success and great that women are meeting and exceeding the goals set forth by the United Nations Goal 4, I was interested to see if these academic successes would transfer to meaningful cultural change and respect. These questions led me to my next point of investigation: what was daily life like for Brazilian women? What laws were there to protect women, young and old alike? With Brazilian waxes, butt lifts,

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and other sexualized beauty trends bearing the label "Brazilian," I was curious what pressures and cultural realities women in Brazil face daily.

### Comparison of Women's Situation in Brazil and in the United States

The situation for women in Brazil is similar in many ways to the experience of being a woman in the United States. For example, women in both countries are subjected to the pay gap, in which women experience unequal payment for equal work. In the United State in 2015, women working full time in the United States typically were paid just 80 percent of what men were paid, a gap of 20 percent.<sup>6</sup> During our stop to meet with councilwomen, *Councilor* Sophia Cavedon Nunes compared this figure to Brazil's pay gap where women are making only two-thirds of what equally qualified men are earning for the same job. Repeatedly, when asked about maternity leave in the United States, the questioners were consistently surprised by the United State's lacking maternity leave laws. When compared to Brazil's cooperative mother-centered laws, gasps of disbelief would be heard when we explained how little the United States government does to assist women and newborns. In the end, we heard over and over again that the laws in the books in Brazil are fairly strong and inclusive of women, but in practice the culture does not permit women to be treated equally. The laws to protect women are good, but the systems and traditions of Brazil are permissive to put women below men. This leads to a high abuse rate and obvious sexualization of women. These outside cultural factors will no doubt affect the position of women in the classroom and their sense of empowerment upon graduation.

Before visiting Brazil, I wanted to consider the existing research to know what to expect in a traditional Brazilian classroom, more specifically what the reality of the female students'

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<sup>6</sup>“The Simple Truth about the Gender Pay Gap (Spring 2017).” *AAUW: Empowering Women Since 1881*. N.p., n.d. Web. June 25, 2017.



education compared to their male peers. Female students' success in school was documented in the article "Exploring modes of Communication Among Pupils in Brazil: Gender Issues in Academic Performance" by Adla B. M. Teixeira, Varlos E. Villani, and Silvania S. do Nascimento.<sup>7</sup> This study was striking because it was focused on the quality of education for male and female students dependent on the teacher's emphasis on equality.<sup>8</sup> Their report made an important distinction that "Girls and boys have different needs, and different social experiences, which lead them to different ways of perceiving and interacting with the world. It is important that these differences are considered in the learning process."<sup>9</sup> This being absolutely true, it is pivotal that teachers understand these differences and tendencies in order to attempt to remedy patterns that lead to unequal educational experiences. For example, "Teachers sometimes demonstrate an acceptance of boys' dominance in class, and an acceptance of girls' submissive or 'good' behaviour, and this occurs at the cost of the full academic development of both girls and boys. These practices also contribute to the persistence of sexual segregation in careers."<sup>10</sup> This is the reality of both the United States and Brazil. Being aware of these tendencies and the long-term effects of biased behavior should be taught in educator training courses. This was something that I hoped to observe in Brazilian schools and definitely saw. As this research suggests,

"In the case studied here, we have seen girls taking their school duties more seriously than boys. In Brazil we need to re-think a classroom structure, which currently leads to a permissive environment for boys where they can exercise their 'macho' power not only

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<sup>7</sup>Teixeira, Adla B. M., Carlos E. Villani, and Silvania S. do Nascimento. 2008. "Exploring modes of Communication Among Pupils in Brazil: Gender Issues in Academic Performance." *Gender & Education* 20, no. 4: 387-398. Accessed May 18, 2017. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

over girls but also over teachers. Despite the efforts of girls in schools, Brazilian women continue to occupy worse positions in the labour market, with lower pay.”<sup>11</sup>

Further, “The acts of resistance (boys) or submission (girls) to the demands of the school and teachers do not lead pupils to make full use of the possibilities that formal education can provide to their future lives in society. The persistent gender disparities still cause significant costs to the wellbeing and development of the nation.” The changes in each and every classroom are dependent on the teacher and their capabilities to create an egalitarian classroom that strives for equal education. With a small change like this, large-scale societal impacts will be observed over time.

This culture of inequality was observed in many instances during our visit in Brazil, most specifically in schools. While we did not have an opportunity to observe students in the natural classroom environment or for extended periods of time, the same patterns noted in their study were noticed in the interactions I had with high school students. The first day we had the opportunity to attend a local high school and sit down with a group of 35 high school students at a school in Porto Alegre. During the discussion, both the students and researchers had the opportunity to question culture, gender, and society. As we asked various questions and introduced ourselves, it became increasingly obvious that the findings of “Exploring Modes of Communication Among Pupils in Brazil: Gender Issues in Academic Performance” were being replicated in classrooms throughout Brazil, including this session! While the number of males and females in the school were relatively equal, the answers would always immediately come from a confident, lower-pitched masculine voice. That is not to say that the females would not respond or were uninterested. I believe that this lack of soprano could be attributed to the

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

confidence that was instilled in boys at a young age that was absent in girls' education. When the group was asked about this phenomena, the whole group seemed to agree with the students who said that "It's normal to hear the boys and not the girls." The girls themselves said that they felt that this happened because girls are more shy, that boys scream, and that generally girls spoke more softly. The consequences of this, however, are devastating. A group of female students in the front just shrugged their shoulders and said they just have to get used to boys talking over them. This feeling could be devastating to the empowerment of women beginning at a young age. If they do not feel free to give opinions, ask questions, and feel heard, society is unintentionally reinforcing the idea that their thoughts, questions, and solutions are inherently less respectable and important than men.

This same phenomena occurred another time when we attended a meeting of a rural school program. Solely based on the verbal participation of the seven females and seven males, I was led to perceive that there were more boys given the opportunity to join the program than girls. When all students were asked to talk about their projects, the male students talked louder, longer, and more confidently. Additionally, the body language led me to believe that the males felt that their place in the room was more important and deserving of a larger space. For example, the male students were "man spreading," or "to sit with one's legs far apart, taking up too much space on a seat shared with other people."<sup>12</sup> The physical power, along with the dominance of the conversation, makes it difficult for female students to feel empowered in the same way as their male peers.

But that's not to say every day for female students is bleak and inaccurate. At an inner-city school in Porto Alegre, I had the opportunity to see young girls working on STEM projects

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<sup>12</sup>"Mandsread." *Dictionary.com*, n.d. Web. June 15, 2017.

with real and applicable purposes. Female teachers were pushing young women to work on these amazing projects that give women skills, knowledge, and confidence. Additionally, all faculty and staff seemed to be aware of the problems associated with stereotypes and treating girls differently than boys, and all claimed to be especially careful and aware of the situation. One example was in the teacher training for the ‘Growing Up Right’ project in the rural district of Santa Cruz; the curriculum aimed to change cultural attitudes and to protect women. When the teachers of this program became aware of one of their female students performing oral sex on a male student on a bus, the group went to the student’s home to talk to his parents and him, but found a permissive family who blamed the female for doing the act. This was not permitted in the program, and they used their power and program to change the cultural acceptance of such acts that embarrassed females and used them for sexual purposes. But no one wants to admit that there is a problem and that they are not part of the solution. The reality is that there is an issue of inequality in education in Brazil, just as there is in the United States. Girls are being treated differently than their male peers. This is a result of the stereotypes and definitions of femininity and the role of women in society, but also because of the permissiveness of school officials, parents, and community members. Until girls are treated equally, pushed similarly, and gender roles are loosened to allow for outspoken girls and respectful boys, these problems will continue to exist.

### Change is Coming

On September 23, 2016, in Sao Paulo, Brazilian President Michel Temer called for a more flexible educational experience, “...by doing away with most mandatory subjects, with the objective of making school more attractive to students.”<sup>13</sup> The newly adopted model makes only

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<sup>13</sup>Alves, Lise. “Brazilian Government Announces New Education Model.” *The Rio Times*, N.p.,

Portuguese and mathematics mandatory for the three years of high school. Additionally, the school day would be lengthened to full day. All of these proposed changes are made with the goal to increase interest in school and to have students study their interests more deeply. These incentives are attempting to combat the high dropout rates of the 8 million Portuguese private and public school systems. According to the Ministry of Education, while the dropout rate for primary school is 1.9 percent, the rate surges to 11.5 percent in high school.<sup>14</sup> So although the gender gap does not exist by number, or may favor female students, the number of students receiving quality education is concerning. While in Brazil, it did not seem as though this program has successfully been put into action. What is pulling or pushing students out of the classroom? Are there any statistics about which sexes are leaving school?

But even before this bill had the possibility of being passed, a larger movement was occurring.

“Beginning in November 2015, threats of mass school closures, cuts to the education budget and attacks on teachers’ working conditions drove hundreds of thousands of pupils, many of them as young as 12, to shut down and camp out in schools...The occupations’ most immediate motivation is the imminent approval of a proposed constitutional amendment (named PEC 241 by Congress) to freeze government spending for 20 years, ostensibly to allow the country to overcome its worst economic crisis in a century following two consecutive years of economic contraction.”<sup>15</sup>

During our visit with Porto Alegre councilwomen, we were informed of this movement. Kindly, the four women helped to connect me to a student marcher named Ana Paulo.<sup>16</sup> She and her peers united to march in protest of their under-supplied, under-staffed, and structurally-

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23 September 2016. Accessed May 19, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Lemos, Gabriel, and Migue Andrade. “Brazil’s High School Students Continue Occupations in Face of Repression.” *World Socialist Web Site*, International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), 9 Nov. 2016. Web. June 14, 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Ana Paulo (occupation movement) in discussion with the author, June 2017.

unsound schools. They were inspired by the movement that had previously been held in Sao Paulo that helped to bring schools together to work to create better learning conditions for students, parents, and teachers. Prior to the march, the students, parents, teachers, and community members met to discuss the issues they felt their schools had throughout the entire city.

More than 1,000 students attended the meeting at Ana Paulo's school alone. They created a list of complaints which included those in attendance feeling like they didn't learn the materials they were being tested on. It was amazing to watch Ana Paulo's face light up as she described the power that this entirely student-led movement had. At the conclusion of the meeting, the students decided it was time to ask for change from the government. After being ignored and using laws asking for a place to be heard, the final straw that led to the march came when the government sent a paper that was posted all around the schools stating that any student could be expelled for speaking out or marching. After deciding to ignore this threat and move forward with the marches and occupations, the community helped and sends supplies to schools, but the government did not. Ana Paulo's school was the fifth school to join the occupation out of 187 schools total in 2016.

So, did their student-led efforts work? In some ways, yes. On the first day after the occupation, the budget was renewed for school reformation. Additionally, a forum was formed to create a platform to discuss all school problems such as food, security, curricular unit themes, and reviewing each school's budget. But in other ways, their efforts proved futile as the government canceled course offerings, the forum eventually ended, and dialogue was discontinued. However, Ana Paulo ended on a hopeful note and was obviously proud of her work. She feels that to this government, education is not important, which is different than the

prior administration. Schools now have a grant to privatize, which she feels will give them more access to resources. Her pride rested on two large victories: First, no arrests were made, and second, no students were criminalized. Despite the threats made by the government, the students who marched were ultimately safe. No known teachers were fired for expressing their opinions or standing with students. Further, she was proud of the organization of the marchers. There were no assigned roles such as spokesperson or leader. All students, both male and female, took turns talking to reporters, cooking and cleaning, and other mundane tasks included in a movement. This was very important for the movement because they felt that they were breaking gender norms in addition to advocating for changes in their schools.

During my interview with the student marcher Ana Paulo, I asked her to describe her ideal equitable school situation. Her dreams and ideals left me rooting alongside her for that day to arrive. First and foremost, she used the adjective “respectful” repeatedly to emphasize the marches goal of creating a climate of cooperation and mutually-shared goals of equality. She would also like to see no racism or sexism in the classroom or in the school environment. This is obviously a wonderful goal, and it is disheartening that this needs to be said by a 19-year-old student as a goal for her educational experience. One example of a prevalent fear that she and her peers experience on a regular basis currently is homophobia within the school community. She described how publicly gay couples are referred to guidance counselors. Even more, parents are also called, with the goal of reforming the child’s sexual preferences. This sense of fear goes directly against the goal of empowerment for anyone, but especially for women. In this dream world that Ana Paulo described, and that all members of society should aim for, Ana Paulo described the purpose of school consciously and accurately: “School makes students free to discuss together with peers and with teachers. This helps all people learn to accept all.”

## Conclusion

At the end of my time in Brazil, I was left with more questions than answers. How does education become equal regardless of gender? Through each of our meetings on the streets and with women in various positions in their society, I was continually in awe of how the beginnings of childhood leave lasting impact on the lives of women in Brazil and in the United States. The ideal world that Ana Paulo describes should be the goal: An inclusive education for all. It is important to note that movements are taking place across large spectrums of people to achieve this. First and foremost is the occupation movement that Ana Paulo helped to lead. Student who speak out for their wants and needs and demand for them to be met by the education system are a big part of this puzzle. Additionally, teachers who care. Teachers who are aware. The group of educators we met are doing their best to remedy this situation. By teaching beyond the standards and including cultural issues such as domestic violence, gender roles, and other real and applicable skills for both males and females to be aware. Students are the change and a possible solution. But in order to change the current system, students and their parents must be active participants. In addition to young women and young men being active participants in being the change they wish to see, all women can be part of the community. For example, women community leaders who have been affected by domestic violence are being trained as paralegals, and are making changes they wish to see in the criminal justice system. Education in the end is the solution to problems. The more aware people are of their rights, the problems they see soon become passable.



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